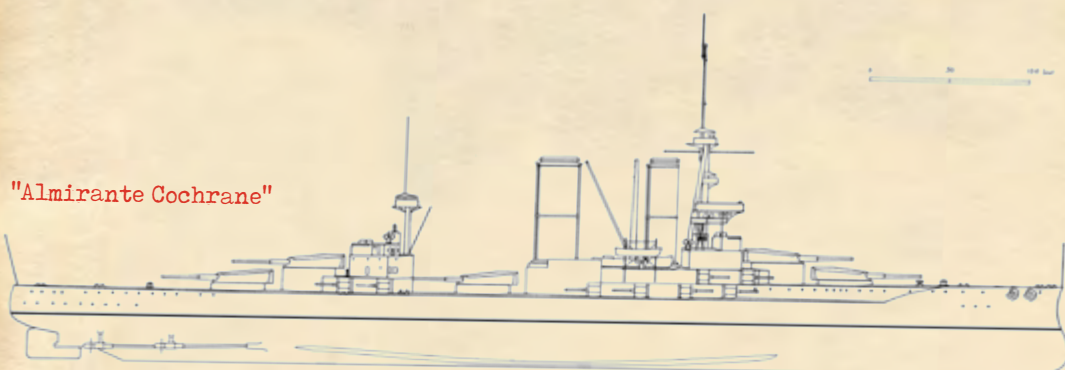


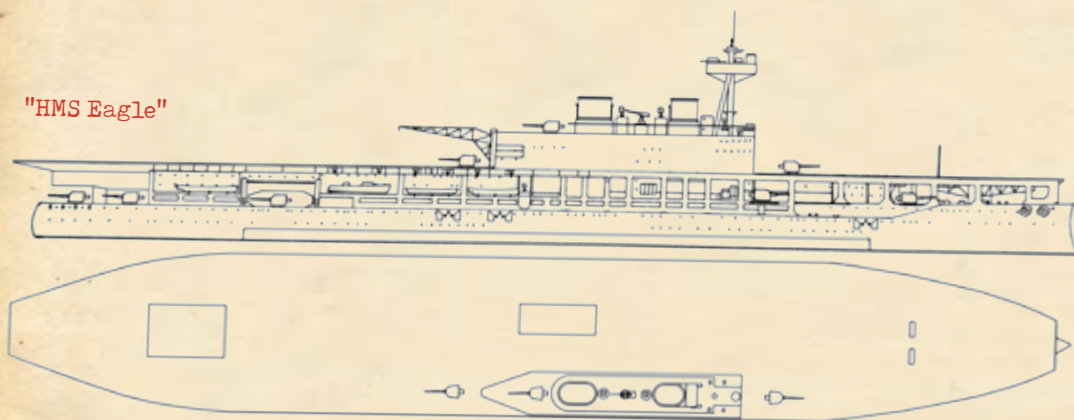


HMS EAGLE & THE CHILEAN CONNECTION

In 1918 the UK purchased an unfinished Chilean battleship to transform into the state-of-the-art aircraft carrier *HMS Eagle*. As part of the deal, British military aircraft were transferred to Chile. **PROFESSOR AIDAN DODSON** explores this arrangement and other aspects of the transaction that eventually gave the Royal Navy what would be — if only for a short while — the world's biggest and most advanced aircraft carrier



"Almirante Cochrane"



"HMS Eagle"

IN THE SUMMER of 1914 British shipyards had in hand, as well as myriad vessels for the Royal Navy, a healthy order book of ships for foreign navies.¹ No fewer than four battleships were under construction by Sir W.G. Armstrong, Whitworth, & Co on the Tyne: one for Turkey (*Sultan Osman I*), two for Chile (the sisters *Almirante Latorre* and *Almirante Cochrane*) and one for Brazil (*Riachuelo*). Work on the latter, barely begun, was abandoned following the outbreak of the First World War, while the Turkish ship was acquired as *HMS Agincourt*, and the more advanced of the Chilean vessels (*Almirante Latorre*) as *HMS Canada*.

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Almirante Cochrane was, however, a few months away from launch, with boilers aboard and closed in, and uptakes complete to the fore-castle deck. The remainder of the machinery was nearly ready for installation, but little of the external armour had yet been fitted. Hardly any work had been done on manufacturing her ten 14in-calibre main guns and their mountings. As there was no scope for early completion for the Royal Navy, she was left in Chilean ownership, with all work suspended. However, a memorandum of October 10, 1914, which had governed the purchase of her sister, stated the following: "The *Almirante Cochrane* remains entirely at the disposal of the Chilean Government. However, should circumstances prove the acquisition of this vessel to be of

essential importance to the British Government, and should the Chilean Government find that [it is] not in urgent need of it, the latter would be prepared to consider the question in the same friendly spirit as in other similar cases".²

During 1917, with the increasing importance of aviation at sea, a review of hulls with potential for conversion to aircraft carriers had been undertaken. *HMS Argus*, purchased in September 1916 as an incomplete Italian liner, was already in hand for conversion, and plans were in place for the first purpose-built carrier, *HMS Hermes*. As a large hull, reasonably advanced in construction, *Almirante Cochrane* was identified as vessel that could be brought into service in advance of *Hermes*. A formal proposal was made on January 23, 1918, and the decision to purchase and convert was made on the 25th, subject to satisfactory agreement with Chile. Accordingly, that day a letter was sent to the British Foreign Office:

"Their Lordships would be much obliged if immediate steps could be taken to bring this proposal before the Chilean Government, and they trust that every endeavour may be made to induce that Government to agree to satisfactory arrangements being completed for the purchase of the vessel."³

However, on January 29 it was requested that the letter be returned or destroyed, since the October 1914 memorandum for the purchase of *Latorre* had been noticed in the interim: "It appears that negotiations with regard to this ship were included in the negotiations of October 1914 between the 1st Lord [First Lord of the Admiralty] and the Chilean Ambassador, and I am asking the 1st Lord to take the matter up where it was then left". Discussions over the

OPPOSITE PAGE Illustrations of the *Almirante Cochrane* as designed as a battleship (top) and as redesigned in July 1919 to become the aircraft carrier *HMS Eagle* (bottom). Illustrations by AIDAN DODSON and IAN STURTON © 2023. BELOW *HMS Eagle* in Hong Kong harbour probably circa 1933–34 after its major refit of 1931–32. During this time the carrier was home to the Hawker Ospreys and Fairey IIIFs of Nos 803 and 824 Sqns of the Fleet Air Arm respectively.

US NAVY

